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BLACK WOMEN'S STUDIES IN TEACHING RELATED TO WOMEN:
HELP OR HINDRANCE TO UNIVERSAL SISTERHOOD?

Presented by

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*Until all of us have made it,
None of us has made it.*

Rosemary Brown

Marie-Joseph-Angélique!¹ Queen Yaa-Asantewaa!²
Mary Ann Shadd!³ Phanadelthur!⁴ Queen Nefertiti!⁵
Harriet Tubman!⁶ ...

Are you familiar with these outstanding women of colour? How many instructors in teaching related to women have used or do use them as positive models? How many students of Women's Studies can identify with these pioneers of colour who have marked milestones in the history of woman and humankind? Have their names become common catchwords in an institute of learning such as Simone de Beauvoir?⁷

In 1943, the remarkable Canadian feminist Nellie McClung affirmed that "people must know the past to understand the present and to face the future".⁸ Women of colour have played out key roles, have blazed important trails, and have laid down bridges on which many of us today intrepidly tread. Yet much of today's Teaching related to Women — all to its detriment — ignores, omits, or simply fails to acknowledge such realities. For Women's Studies, or Teaching related to Women, receiving a booster shot in the arm from the Women's Movement, have thus inherited all its accompanying concepts norms and ... alas, *colour blindness*.

Drawing so heavily on a social movement which in itself characteristically tended at the best of times to exclude women of colour and at the worst of times to tack them on as a window-dressing afterthought, present Teaching related to Women still reflects, by and large, these same exclusionary

traits. What has been concretized as Women's Studies and has come to be known as traditional Women's Studies, fails to bear up well under close scrutiny when it comes to Black Women and other Women of colour. We remain invisible. Nevertheless we Black Women ARE indeed Women. We, ourselves, are very much aware of our status as Women and indeed we DO concur with the ideas and precepts of the Women's Movement. However, living as we do in a world that persists in seeing us first and foremost as Black, we cannot negate our Blackness. Since "Blackness" is a condition that was and is foisted upon us by an oppressive society, we are therefore inevitably forced to acknowledge this condition, if only for reasons of mere survival. Therefore, we are first and foremost Black... and then Women.

But why talk about Black Women's Studies? What is Black Women's Studies? Interestingly enough, ideologically, we all now seem to be able to grasp and understand fairly well the concept of Black Studies. Yet, in a realistic sense, the need exists for Black Studies programs only because, in the final analysis our curriculum — both visible and hidden — is in actual fact nothing but a White Studies Program, projecting an image of the world as being a world of Whites that bars Blacks.⁹ In the same manner, a terrible need exists for Black Women's Studies because our present Women's Studies and Teaching related to Women programs clearly exclude — especially in their philosophical underpinnings — Women of colour. In other words, Black Women's Studies is a positive response to the neglect of Black Women by Teaching related to Women.

One fundamental tenet must be kept in mind: Education's basic work is to provoke change.¹⁰ Modified behaviour becomes therefore, an important goal of Teaching related to Women. And thus, Women's Studies, a new field in itself, is nothing if not a catalyst for social change. Women's Studies aspires to complete and correct the record by grafting on to present knowledge, knowledge about women. And so, Teaching related to Women is, *ipso facto*, a progressive social movement. This movement is in itself the fruit of two important social movements: the Black Consciousness Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement. And as such, it behooves Women's Studies to manifest innovation as well as a deep commitment to break with traditional approach, traditional content, and traditional values. Any Teaching related to Women owes it to itself to go beyond the proverbial "cosmetic" cover-up or lip service that traditional Teaching has instituted. Feminist writer, Frances Wilson has said that "resources for Women's Studies courses in Canada ought to be drawn largely from the history literature, traditions and social structure of Canada".¹¹ But I further maintain that we are obliged to assess critically and reevaluate these very sources in order to avoid perpetuating oppressive mechanisms and structures, whether we do this consciously or unconsciously. For, if Women's Studies merely signify that White Women are fighting for the right to be able to oppress Black Women equally with White men, then it makes little sense for Black Women to participate in this struggle; since it is a known fact that to Black Women, oppression by White males or White females makes absolutely no difference — it is the oppression that hurts!¹²

Through a progressive social movement like Women's Studies and Teaching related to Women, Sisterhood can become a real worldwide possibility.¹³ However, to make this a reality, Women's Studies cannot afford the luxury of being shortsighted, tunnel-visioned, or colour-blind. The struggle for equality of Women must be waged not only within the ranks of the fight against sexism, but also on the broader field of the war on racism. If we really mean Women with a capital "W", Women's Studies cannot refuse to perceive colour or differences, indeed, Women's Studies dare not see everybody only as "women" — professing colour blindness. Real Teaching related to Women durst no longer deny that there are differences, maintaining that "We are all Women!"... or "We are all human beings!" We ARE Women...YES! But as Black Women, we have a great deal of cultural, historical, and experiential differences that need to be recognized, acknowledged and shared.

Black Women already share a past far different from that of White Women. Black Women have had a long history of "non-traditional" roles.¹⁴ When White Women were into consciousness-raising sessions, trying to come to grips with who they were quite apart from their husbands and children, Black Women were seeking groups that could and would address the issue of massive unemployment and underemployment among Black people in general, and Black Women in particular.¹⁵ Now, today, when Women from the *developed* countries are lobbying for the right to use their maiden name, Women from the *underdeveloped and oppressed* countries are scrounging for food and water in order to keep their families alive in a hand to mouth existence. When White Women were trying to find time to write or do research, Black Women were trying to find groups that could and would address the poor education their children were receiving.¹⁶ And now, today, when Women of the

developed countries are seeking greater sexual freedom and gratification, Women from the *underdeveloped and oppressed* countries are fighting for their country and their very lives in liberation armies. When White Women were devising strategies for getting out of the house and into the labour force, vast numbers of Black Women were suggesting that they would gladly return home and take care of the home and children if the economic system were not so oppressive on Black men.¹⁷ (At the same time, We, Black Women, were saying to Black men that a return to the home did not change our independent nature).¹⁸ And now, today, when Women of the *developed* countries are clamoring for the right to abortion on demand, many Women from the *underdeveloped and oppressed* countries are crying out for help against enforced sterilisation and the imposition of untested and unsafe medical drugs.¹⁹

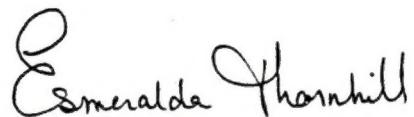
In other words, even though multiple issues for Women the World over are truly common denominators, the point remains that it is the *order of priorities* that differs. It is for this precise reason that Teaching related to Women, Women's Studies, and the Women's Movement, must begin to address seriously *issues of economic and racial oppression* in order to be relevant to Black Women and other Women of colour.²⁰

Black Women's Studies is a necessary component of and an essential dimension to any Teaching related to Women. It should be omnipresent and ubiquitous, pervading and permeating any Women's Studies program.

From a methodological viewpoint, in order to realize fully a program of Teaching related to Women, I posit that Women's Studies:

1. Can no longer remain *colour-blind* to Black Women, to our experiences, to our accomplishments, contributions, social impact, aspirations and preoccupations.
2. Can no longer subscribe to the *Addendum Syndrome* which at some times "footnotes" the Black Woman, and at other times tacks on as an "appendix" information about exceptional Women of colour while the main curriculum content remains White Women's Studies.
3. Can no longer exclude from the *decisional levels* and *blueprint stages* the *active involvement* of Women of colour, who, themselves experts, can help to ensure that the orientation and materials selected are the most accurate and authentic representation of their group.
4. Can no longer *ethically* continue being accomplices in the "Conspiracy of Silence on Racism". Women's Studies is obliged to make an *up front commitment against racism*. And as such, Women's Studies must give in its curriculum, information about the way in which DISCRIMINATION and RACISM function in society as social forces.

This first ever international, coming together of Women to discuss Teaching and Research Related to Women must mean that from the outset we believe that we *share* a common concern, a common commitment, and a common goal. If we Educators in the area of Teaching related to Women or Women's Studies are really the progressive activists and committed professionals we profess to be, if we consider ourselves true Members of the International Community of the Concerned, if we believe that we ARE indeed, universally, Sisters in Struggle, then we can do NO LESS than "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!"²¹ until Black Women's Studies assumes its rightful place in Teaching related to Women as a help to universal Sisterhood!

A handwritten signature in cursive ink, appearing to read "Esmeralda Thornhill".

ESMERALDA THORNHILL
Agente de formation
Service d'éducation
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Le 29 juillet 1982

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- ¹ Marie-Joseph-Angélique: Black Montreal Slave who launched the first documented act of defiance against slavery. Apprehending her imminent sale, Marie-Joseph-Angélique set fire to the residence of her mistress before taking flight. The ensuing conflagration ravaged the city razing to the ground over forty(40) buildings. This defiant slave was later captured, brought to trial, condemned, and publicly executed, being hung first before being burnt at the stake.
- ² Queen Yaa Asantewaa: Black African Queen, known to her people as Yaa Asantawaa the Great, while the British invaders nicknamed her the Old Terror. This Asanti Queen was the live symbol of hope for Ghana's Akan nation against early British oppression. "The woman who carried a gun and the sword of state into battle" fought against the ideas and practices of Christianity which she predicted would be a disorienting and disruptive force in Asanti life.
- ³ Mary-Ann Shadd: Black educator abolitionist and lawyer, who published one of Canada's early Black Newspapers the Provincial Freeman and has been credited with being the first Woman Editor in Canada.
- ⁴ Phanadelthur: Chippewa Indian Woman who served, during the 1700's, as Peacemaker between her People, the Cree, and the Hudson's Bay Company.

5 Queen Nefertiti: One of the more renowned African Queens, shrewdly appropriated by Europe — but who remains African nonetheless. This wise and creative woman had great influence on her husband Akhenaton with whom she is portrayed as sharing equal status. She also wielded mighty political power.

6 Harriet Tubman: Black slave, abolitionist, feminist, educator, orator — Moses of Her People. Born a slave in the United States, Harriet Tubman fled to the Northern States where she worked, saved her earnings, and re-entered the South in order to lead her parents and family out to safety. This proved to be the first of nineteen(19) trips whereby, in spite of a bounty of 40 000\$ on her head, Harriet Tubman "conducted" along the Underground Railroad (secret network of places and resource people) more than 300 Black slaves who found freedom in Canada and settled the region of Southern Ontario.

7 Simone de Beauvoir Institute: The Department of Women's Studies and Research on Women of Concordia University, and host to the First International Conference on Teaching and Research related to Women, Montreal, Quebec, July 26 - August 4, 1982.

8 Gwen Matheson, (Editor), Women in the Canadian Mosaic (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1976, "Introduction"), p.IX.

⁹ Robert Moore, "Race and Education for the 1980's", Race Relations: New Perspectives, New Delivery Systems for Education. Proceedings of the Conference on Race Relations and Education, January 28 and 29, 1982, hosted by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, Race Relations Division (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Labour, 1982), p.35.

¹⁰ Frances Wilson. "The New Subject: Women's Studies", Women in the Canadian Mosaic, Edited by Gwen Matheson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1976), p.195.

¹¹ Idem, p.190.

¹² Rosemary Brown, "A New Kind of Power", Women in the Canadian Mosaic, Edited by Gwen Matheson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1976), p.295.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Frances Rodgers-Rose, The Black Woman. Beverly Hills (California: Sage Publications Inc., 1980), p.296.

¹⁵ Idem, p.297.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

19 "Human Guinea Pigs", Afro Can, May 1982, p.1.

20 Frances Rodgers-Rose, op.cit., p.297.

21 "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!": Famous exhortation of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

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